

Jakobson, age twenty-three, summer 1920, Prague

ROMAN JAKOBSON

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EDITED BY KRYSTYNA POMORSKA
AND STEPHEN RUDY

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CHAPTER 16

On a Generation That Squandered Its Poets

Killed;—
Little matter
Whether I or he
Killed them.

Majakovskij's poetry—his imagery, his lyrical composition—I have written about these things and published some of my remarks. The idea of writing a monograph has never left me. Majakovskij's poetry is qualitatively different from everything in Russian verse before him, however intent one may be on establishing genetic links. This is what makes the subject particularly intriguing. The structure of his poetry is profoundly original and revolutionary. But how it is possible to write about Majakovskij's poetry now, when the paramount subject is not the rhythm but the death of the poet, when (if I may resort to Majakovskij's own poetic phrase) "sudden grief" is not yet ready to give in to "a clearly realized pain"?

During one of our meetings, Majakovskij, as was his custom, read me his latest poems. Considering his creative potential I could not help comparing them with what he might have produced. "Very good," I said, "but not as good as Majakovskij." Yet now the creative powers are canceled out, the inimitable stanzas can no longer be compared to anything else, the words "Majakovskij's last poems" have suddenly taken on a tragic meaning. Sheer grief at his absence has overshadowed the absent one. Now it is more painful, but still easier, to write not

bout the one we have lost but rather about our own loss and those of is who have suffered it.

It is our generation that has suffered the loss. Roughly, those of us who are now between thirty and forty-five years old. Those who, already fully matured, entered into the years of the Revolution not as unmolded clay but still not hardened, still capable of adapting to experience and change, still capable of taking a dynamic rather than a static view of our lives.

It has been said more than once that the first poetic love of our generation was Aleksandr Blok. Velimir Xlebnikov gave us a new epos, the first genuinely epic creations after many decades of drought. Even his briefer verses create the impression of epic fragments, and Xlebnikov easily combined them into narrative poems. Xlebnikov is epic in spite of our antiepic times, and therein lies one of the reasons he is somewhat alien to the average reader. Other poets brought his poetry closer to the reader; they drew upon Xlebnikov, pouring out his "word ocean" into many lyrical streamlets. In contrast to Xlebnikov, Majakovskij embodied the lyrical urges of this generation. "The broad epic canvas" is deeply alien to him and unacceptable. Even when he attempts "a bloody Iliad of the Revolution," or "an Odyssey of the famine years," what appears is not an epic but a heroic lyric on a grand scale, offered "at the top of his voice." There was a point when symbolist poetry was in its decline and it was still not clear which of the two new mutually antagonistic trends, Acmeism or Futurism, would prevail. Xlebnikov and Majakovskij gave to contemporary literary art its leitmotif. The name Gumilev marks a collateral branch of modern Russian poetry—its characteristic overtone. For Xlebnikov and for Majakovskij "the homeland of creative poetry is the future"; in contrast, Esenin is a lyrical glance backward. His verse expresses the weariness of a generation.

Modern Russian poetry after 1910 is largely defined by these names. The verse of Aseev and Sel'vinskij is bright indeed, but it is a reflected light. They do not announce but reflect the spirit of the times. Their magnitude is a derivative quantity. Pasternak's books and perhaps those of Mandel'štam are remarkable, but theirs is chamber verse:[1] new creation will not be kindled by it. The heart of a generation cannot take fire with such verses because they do not shatter the boundaries of the present.

Gumilev (1886–1921) was shot, after prolonged mental agony and in

great pain; Blok (1880–1921) died, amid cruel privations and under circumstances of inhuman suffering; Xlebnikov (1885–1922) passed away; after careful planning Esenin (1895–1925) and Majakovskij (1894–1930) killed themselves. And so it happened that during the third decade of this century, those who inspired a generation perished between the ages of thirty and forty, each of them sharing a sense of doom so vivid and sustained that it became unbearable.

This is true not only of those who were killed or killed themselves. Blok and Xlebnikov, when they took to their beds with disease, had also perished. Zamjatin wrote in his reminiscences: "We are all to blame for this . . . I remember that I could not stand it and I phoned Gorkij: Blok is dead. We can't be forgiven for that." Šklovskij wrote in a tribute to Xlebnikov:

> Forgive us for yourself and for others whom we will kill. The state is not responsible for the destruction of people. When Christ lived and spoke the state did not understand his Aramaic, and it has never understood simple human speech. The Roman soldiers who pierced Christ's hands are no more to blame than the nails. Nevertheless, it is very painful for those whom they crucify.[2]

Blok the poet fell silent and died long before the man, but his younger contemporaries snatched verses even from death. ("Wherever I die I'll die singing," wrote Majakovskij.) Xlebnikov knew he was dying. His body decomposed while he lived. He asked for flowers in his room so that the stench would not be noticed, and he kept writing to the end. A day before his suicide Esenin wrote a masterful poem about his impending death. Majakovskij's farewell letter is full of poetry: we find the professional writer in every line of that document. He wrote it two nights before his death and in the interval there were to be conversations and conferences about the everyday business of literature; but in that letter we read: "Please don't gossip. The deceased hated gossip." We remember that Majakovskij's long-standing demand upon himself was that the post must "hurry time forward." And here he is, already looking at his suicide note through the eyes of someone reading it the day after tomorrow. The letter, with its several literary motifs and with Majakovskij's own death in it, is so closely interrelated with his poetry that it can be understood only in the context of that poetry.

The poetry of Majakovskij from his first verses, in "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste," to his last lines is one and indivisible. It repre-

sents the dialectical development of a single theme. It is an extraordinarily unified symbolic system. A symbol once thrown out only as a kind of hint will later be developed and presented in a totally new perspective. He himself underlines these links in his verse by alluding to earlier works. In the poem "About That" ("Pro èto"), for instance, he recalls certain lines from the poem "Man" ("Čelovek"), written several years earlier, and in the latter poem he refers to lyrics of an even earlier period. An image at first offered humorously may later and in a different context lose its comic effect, or conversely, a motif developed solemnly may be repeated in a parodistic vein. Yet this does not mean that the beliefs of yesterday are necessarily held up to scorn; rather, we have here two levels, the tragic and the comic, of a single symbolic system, as in the medieval theater. A single clear purpose directs the system of symbols. "We shall thunder out a new myth upon the world."

A mythology of Majakovskij?

His first collection of poems was entitled *I*. Vladimir Majakovskij is not only the hero of his first play, but his name is the title of that tragedy, as well as of his last collection of poems. The author dedicates his verse "to his beloved self." When Majakovskij was working on the poem "Man" he said, "I want to depict simply man, man in general, not an abstraction, à la Andreev, but a genuine 'Ivan' who waves his arms, eats cabbage soup, and can be directly felt." But Majakovskij could directly feel only himself. This is said very well in Trotsky's article on him (an intelligent article, the poet said): "In order to raise man he elevates him to the level of Majakovskij. The Greeks were anthropomorphists, naively likening the forces of nature to themselves; our poet is a Majakomorphist, and he populates the squares, the streets, and the fields of the Revolution only with himself." Even when the hero of Majakovskij's poem appears as the 150-million-member collective, realized in one Ivan—a fantastic epic hero—the latter in turn assumes the familiar features of the poet's "ego." This ego asserts itself even more frankly in the rough drafts of the poem.[3]

Empirical reality neither exhausts nor fully takes in the various shapes of the poet's ego. Majakovskij passes before us in one of his "innumerable souls." "The unbending spirit of eternal rebellion" has poured itself into the poet's muscles, the irresponsible spirit without name or patronymic, "from future days, just a man." "And I feel that I am too small for myself. Someone obstinately bursts out of me." Weariness with fixed and narrow confines, the urge to transcend static boundaries—such is Majakovskij's infinitely varied theme. No lair in the world can contain the poet and the unruly horde of his desires. "Driven into the earthly pen I drag a daily yoke." "The accursed earth has me chained." The grief of Peter the Great is that of a "prisoner, held in chains in his own city." Hulks of districts wriggle out of the "zones marked off by the governor." The cage of the blockade in Majakovskij's verses turns into the world prison destroyed by a cosmic gust directed "beyond the radiant slits of sunsets." The poet's revolutionary call is directed at all of those "for whom life is cramped and unbearable," "who cry out because the nooses of noon are too tight." The ego of the poet is a battering ram, thudding into a forbidden Future; it is a mighty will "hurled over the last limit" toward the incarnation of the Future, toward an absolute fullness of being: "one must rip joy from the days yet to come."

Opposed to this creative urge toward a transformed future is the stabilizing force of an immutable present, overlaid, as this present is, by a stagnating slime, which stifles life in its tight, hard mold. The Russian name for this element is *byt*. It is curious that this word and its derivatives should have such a prominent place in the Russian language (from which it spread even to the Komi), while West European languages have no word that corresponds to it. Perhaps the reason is that in the European collective consciousness there is no concept of such a force as might oppose and break down the established norms of life. The revolt of the individual against the fixed forms of social convention presupposes the existence of such a force. The real antithesis of *byt* is a slippage of social norms that is immediately sensed by those involved in social life. In Russia this sense of an unstable foundation has been present for a very long time, and not just as a historical generalization but as a direct experience. We recall that in the early nineteenth century, during the time of Čaadaev, there was the sense of a "dead and stagnant life," but at the same time a feeling of instability and uncertainty: "Everything is slipping away, everything is passing," wrote Čaadaev. "In our own homes we are as it were in temporary quarters. In our family life we seem foreigners. In our cities we look like nomads." And as Majakovskij put it:

> . . . laws/ concepts/ faiths
> The granite blocks of cities
> And even the very sun's reliable glow—

Everything had become as it were fluid,
Seemed to be sliding a little—
A little bit thinned and watered down.

But all these shifts, all this "leaking of the poet's room," are only a "hardly audible draft, which is probably only felt by the very tip of the soul." Inertia continues to reign. It is the poet's primordial enemy, and he never tires of returning to this theme. "Motionless *byt*." "Everything stands as it has been for ages. *Byt* is like a horse that can't be spurred and stands still." "Slits of *byt* are filled with fat and coagulate, quiet and wide." "The swamp of *byt* is covered over with slime and weeds." "Old little *byt* is moldy." "The giant *byt* crawls everywhere through the holes." "Force booming *byt* to sing!" "Put the question of *byt* on the agenda." "In fall,/ winter,/ spring,/ summer/ During the day/ during sleep/ I don't accept/ I hate this/ all./ All/ that in us/ is hammered in by past slavishness/ all/ that like the swarm of trifles/ was covering/ and covered with *byt*/ even our red-flagged ranks." Only in the poem "About That" is the poet's desperate struggle with *byt* fully laid bare. There it is not personified as it is elsewhere in his work. On the contrary, the poet hammers his verbal attack directly into that moribund *byt* which he despises. And *byt* reacts by executing the rebel "with all rifles and batteries, from every Mauser and Browning." Elsewhere in Majakovskij this phenomenon is, as we have said, personified—not however as a living person but rather, in the poet's own phrase, as an animated tendency. In "Man" the poet's enemy is very broadly generalized as "Ruler of all, my rival, my invincible enemy." But it is also possible to localize this enemy and give him a particular shape. One may call him "Wilson," domicile him in Chicago, and, in the language of fairytale hyperbole, outline his very portrait (as in "150,000,000"). But then the poet offers a "little footnote": "Those who draw the Wilsons, Lloyd Georges, and Clemenceaus sometimes show their mugs with moustaches, sometimes not; but that's beside the point since they're all one and the same thing." The enemy is a universal image. The forces of nature, people, metaphysical substances, are only its incidental aspects and disguises: "The same old bald fellow directs us unseen, the master of the earthly cancan. Sometimes in the shape of an idea, sometimes a kind of devil, or then again he glows as God, hidden behind a cloud." If we should try to translate the Majakovskian mythology into the language of speculative philosophy, the exact equivalent for this enmity would be the antinomy "I" versus

"not-I." A better designation for Majakovskij's enemy could hardly be found.

Just as the creative ego of the poet is not coextensive with his actually existing self, so conversely the latter does not take in all of the former. In the faceless regiment of his acquaintances, all tangled in the "apartment-house spider web,"

One of them/ I recognized
As like as a twin
Myself/ my very own self.

This terrible "double" of the poet is his conventional and commonplace "self," the purchaser and owner whom Xlebnikov once contrasted with the inventor and discoverer. That self has an emotional attachment to a securely selfish and stable life, to "*my* little place, and a household that's *mine,* with *my* little picture on the wall." The poet is oppressed by the specter of an unchangeable world order, a universal apartment-house *byt:* "No sound, the universe is asleep."

Revolutions shake up violently the bodies of kingdoms,
The human herd changes its herdsmen.
But you/ uncrowned ruler of our hearts
No rebellion ever touches.

Against this unbearable might of *byt* an uprising as yet unheard of and nameless must be contrived. The terms used in speaking of the class struggle are only conventional figures, only approximate symbols, only one of the levels: *the part for the whole.* Majakovskij, who has witnessed "the sudden reversals of fortune in battles not yet fought," must give new meaning to the habitual terminology. In the rough draft of the poem "150,000,000" we find the following definitions:

> To be a bourgeois does not mean to own capital or squander gold. It means to be the heel of a corpse on the throat of the young. It means a mouth stopped up with fat. To be a proletarian doesn't mean to have a dirty face and work in a factory: it means to be in love with the future that's going to explode the filth of the cellars—believe me.

The basic fusion of Majakovskij's poetry with the theme of the revolution has often been pointed out. But another indissoluble combination of motifs in the poet's work has not so far been noticed: revolution and the destruction of the poet. This idea is suggested even as early as the *Tragedy* (1913), and later this fact that the linkage of the two

is not accidental becomes "clear to the point of hallucination." No mercy will be shown to the army of zealots, or to the doomed volunteers in the struggle. The poet himself is an expiatory offering in the name of that universal and real resurrection that is to come; that was the theme of the poem "War and the Universe" ("Vojna i mir"). And in the poem "A Cloud in Trousers" ("Oblako v štanax") the poet promises that when a certain year comes "in the thorny crown" of revolutions, "For you/ I will tear out my soul/ and trample on it till it spreads out,/ and I'll give it to you,/ a bloody banner." In the poems written after the revolution the same idea is there, but in the past tense. The poet, mobilized by the revolution, has "stamped on the throat of his own song." (This line occurs in the last poem he published, an address to his "comrade-descendants" of the future, written in clear awareness of the coming end.) In the poem "About That" the poet is destroyed by *byt*. "The bloodletting is over. . . . Only high above the Kremlin the tatters of the poet shine in the wind—a little red flag." This image is plainly an echo of "A Cloud in Trousers."

The poet's hungry ear captures the music of the future, but he is not destined to enter the Promised Land. A vision of the future is present in all the most essential pages of Majakovskij's work. "And such a day dawned—Andersen's fairytales crawled about like little pups at his feet"; "You can't tell whether it's air, or a flower, or a bird. It sings, and it's fragrant, and it's brightly colored all at once"; "Call us Cain or call us Abel, it doesn't matter. The future is here." For Majakovskij the future is a dialectical synthesis. The removal of all contradictions finds its expression in the facetious image of Christ playing checkers with Cain, in the myth of the universe permeated by love, and in the proposition "The commune is a place where bureaucrats will disappear and there will be many poems and songs." The present disharmony, the contradiction between poetry and building, "the delicate business of the poet's place in the working ranks," is one of Majakovskij's most acute problems. "Why," he asked, "should literature occupy its own special little corner? Either it should appear in every newspaper, every day, on every page, or else it's totally useless. The kind of literature that's dished out as dessert can go to hell" (from the *Reminiscences* of D. Lebedev).

Majakovskij always regarded ironically talk of the insignificance and death of poetry (really nonsense, he would say, but useful for the purpose of revolutionizing art). He planned to pose the question of the

future of art in the "Fifth International" ("Pjatyj internacional"), a poem that he worked on long and carefully but never finished. According to the outline of the work, the first stage of the revolution, a worldwide social transformation, has been completed, but humanity is bored. *Byt* still survives. So a new revolutionary act of world-shaking proportions is required: "A revolution of the spirit" in the name of a new organization of life, a new art, and a new science. The published introduction to the poem is an order to abolish the beauties of verse and to introduce into poetry the brevity and accuracy of mathematical formulas. He offers an example of a poetic structure built on the model of a logical problem. When I reacted skeptically to this poetic program—the exhortation in verse against verse—Majakovskij smiled: "But didn't you notice that the solution of my logical problem is a transrational solution?"

The remarkable poem "Homeward!" ("Domoj!") is devoted to the contradiction between the rational and the irrational. It is a dream about the fusion of the two elements, a kind of rationalization of the irrational:

> I feel/ like a Soviet factory
> Manufacturing happiness.
> I don't want/ to be plucked
> Like a flower/ after the day's work
> . . . . .
> I want/ the heart to be paid
> Its wage of love/ at the specialist's rate
> I want/ the factory committee
> To put a lock on my lips
> When the work is done
> I want/ the pen to be equal to the bayonet
> And I want Stalin/ to report in the name of the Politburo
> About the production of verse
> As he does about pig iron and steel.
> Thus, and so it is/ we've reached
> The topmost level/ up from the worker's hovels
> In the Union/ of Republics
> The appreciation of verse/ has exceeded the prewar level.

The idea of the acceptance of the irrational appears in Majakovskij's work in various guises, and each of the images he uses for this purpose tends to reappear in his poetry. The stars ("You know, if they light up the stars,/ that means, somebody needs them!"). The madness of

spring ("Everything is clear concerning bread/ and concerning peace./ But the prime question,/ the question of spring/ must be/ elucidated"). And the heart that changes winter to spring and water to wine ("It's that I'm/ going to raise my heart like a flag,/ a marvelous twentieth-century miracle"). And that hostile answer of the enemy in the poem "Man": "If the heart is everything/ then why,/ why have I been gathering you, my dear money!/ How do they dare to sing?/ Who gave them the right?/ Who said the days could blossom into July?/ Lock the heavens in wires!/ Twist the earth into streets!"

But Majakovskij's central irrational theme is the theme of love. It is a theme that cruelly punishes those who dare to forget it, whose storms toss us about violently and push everything else out of our ken. And like poetry itself this theme is both inseparable from and in disharmony with our present life; it is "closely mingled with our jobs, our incomes, and all the rest." And love is crushed by *byt:*

> Omnipotent one
> You thought up a pair of hands
> Fixed it
> So that everyone has a head.
> Why couldn't you fix it
> So that without torment
> We could just kiss and kiss and kiss?

Eliminate the irrational? Majakovskij draws a bitterly satirical picture. On the one hand, the heavy boredom of certain rational revelations: the usefulness of the cooperative, the danger of liquor, political education, and on the other hand, an unashamed hooligan of planetary dimensions (in the poem "A Type" ["Tip"]). Here we have a satirical sharpening of the dialectical contradiction. Majakovskij says "yes" to the rationalization of production, technology, and the planned economy if as a result of all this "the partially opened eye of the future sparkles with real earthly love." But he rejects it all if it means only a selfish clutching at the present. If that's the case then grandiose technology becomes only a "highly perfected apparatus of parochialism and gossip on the worldwide scale" (from an essay "My Discovery of America"). Just such a planetary narrowness and parochialism permeates life in the year 1970, as shown in Majakovskij's play about the future, *The Bedbug* (*Klop*), where we see a rational organization without emotion, with no superfluous expenditure of energy, without dreams. A worldwide social revolution has been achieved, but the revolution of the spirit is still in the future. The play is a quiet protest against the spiritual inheritors of those languid judges who, in his early satirical poem "without knowing just why or wherefore, attacked Peru." Some of the characters in *The Bedbug* have a close affinity with the world of Zamjatin's *We,* although Majakovskij bitterly ridicules not only the rational utopian community but the rebellion against it in the name of alcohol, the irrational and unregulated individual happiness. Zamjatin, however, idealizes that rebellion.

Majakovskij has an unshakable faith that, beyond the mountain of suffering, beyond each rising plateau of revolutions, there does exist the "real heaven on earth," the only possible resolution of all contradictions. *Byt* is only a surrogate for the coming synthesis; it doesn't remove contradictions but only conceals them. The poet is unwilling to compromise with the dialectic; he rejects any mechanical softening of the contraditions. The objects of Majakovskij's unsparing sarcasm are the "compromisers" (as in the play *Mystery-Bouffe*). Among the gallery of "bureaucrat-compromisers" portrayed in his agitational pieces, we have in *The Bathhouse* (*Banja*) the Glavnačpups Pobedonosikov, whose very title is an acronym for "Chief Administrator for the Organizing of Compromises." Obstacles in the road to the future—such is the true nature of these "artificial people." The time machine will surely spew them out.

It seemed to him a criminal illusion to suppose that the essential and vital problem of building a worldwide "wonderful life" could be put aside for the sake of devising some kind of personal happiness. "It's early to rejoice," he wrote. The opening scenes of *The Bedbug* develop the idea that people are tired of a life full of struggle, tired of front-line equality, tired of military metaphors. "This is not 1919. People want to live." They build family nests for themselves: "Roses will bloom and be fragrant at the present juncture of time." "Such is the elegant fulfillment of our comrade's life of struggle." Oleg Bajan, the servant of beauty in *The Bedbug,* formulates this sentiment in the following words: "We have managed to compromise and control class and other contradictions, and in this a person armed with a Marxist eye, so to speak, can't help seeing, as in a single drop of water, the future happiness of mankind, which the common people call socialism." (In an earlier, lyrical context the same idea took this form: "There he is in a soft bed, fruit beside him and wine on the night table.") Majakovskij's sharply chiseled lines express unlimited contempt for all

those who seek comfort and rest. All such people receive their answer from the mechanic in *The Bedbug:* "We'll never crawl out of our trenches with a white flag in our hands." And the poem "About That" develops the same theme in the form of an intimate personal experience. In that work Majakovskij begs for the advent of love, his savior: "Confiscate my pain—take it away!" And Majakovskij answers himself:

> Leave off./ Don't/ not a word/ no requests,
> What's the point/ that you/ alone/ should succeed?
> I'll wait/ and together with the whole unloved earth
> With the whole/ human mass/ we'll win it.
> Seven years I stood/ and I'll stand two hundred
> Nailed here/ waiting for it.
> On the bridge of years/ derided/ scorned
> A redeemer of earthly love/ I must stand
> Stand for all/ for everyone I'll atone
> For everyone I'll weep.

But Majakovskij knows very well that even if his youth should be renewed four times and he should four times grow old again, that would only mean a fourfold increase of his torment, a four times multiplied horror at the senseless daily grind and at premature celebrations of victory. In any case, he will never live to see the revelation all over the world of an absolute fullness of life, and the final count still stands: "I've not lived out my earthly lot; I've not lived through my earthly love." His destiny is to be an expiatory victim who never knew joy:

> A bullet for the rest
> For some a knife.
> But what about me?
> And when?

Majakovskij has now given us the final answer to that question.

The Russian Futurists believed in cutting themselves loose from the "classic generals," and yet they are vitally tied to the Russian literary tradition. It is interesting to note that famous line of Majakovskij's, so full of bravado (and at the same time a tactical slogan): "But why don't we attack Puškin?" It was followed not long after by those mournful lines addressed to the same Puškin: "You know I too will soon be dead and mute./And after my death/ we two will be quite close together." Majakovskij's dreams of the future that repeat the utopian visions of Dostoevskij's Versilov in *A Raw Youth,* the poet's frequent hymns to the "man-god," the "thirteenth apostle's" fight against God, the ethical

rejection of Him—all this is much closer to Russian literature of an earlier day than it is to official and regimented Soviet "godlessness." And Majakovskij's belief in personal immortality has nothing to do with the official catechism of Jaroslavskij's "godless" movement. The poet's vision of the coming resurrection of the dead is vitally linked with the materialistic mysticism of the Russian philosopher Fëdorov.

When in the spring of 1920 I returned to Moscow, which was tightly blockaded, I brought with me recent books and information about scientific developments in the West. Majakovskij made me repeat several times my somewhat confused remarks on the general theory of relativity and about the growing interest in that concept in Western Europe. The idea of the liberation of energy, the problem of the time dimension, and the idea that movement at the speed of light may actually be a reverse movement in time—all these things fascinated Majakovskij. I'd seldom seen him so interested and attentive. "Don't you think," he suddenly asked, "that we'll at last achieve immortality?" I was astonished, and I mumbled a skeptical comment. He thrust his jaw forward with that hypnotic insistence so familiar to anyone who knew Majakovskij well: "I'm absolutely convinced," he said, "that one day there will be no more death. And the dead will be resurrected. I've got to find some scientist who'll give me a precise account of what's in Einstein's books. It's out of the question that I shouldn't understand it. I'll see to it that this scientist receives an academician's ration." At that point I became aware of a Majakovskij that I'd never known before. The demand for victory over death had taken hold of him. He told me later that he was writing a poem called "The Fourth International" (he afterward changed it to "The Fifth International") that would deal with such things. "Einstein will be a member of that International. The poem will be much more important than '150,000,000.'" Majakovskij was at the time obsessed with the idea of sending Einstein a congratulatory telegram "from the art of the future to the science of the future." We never again returned to this matter in our conversations, and he never finished "The Fifth International." But in the epilogue to "About That" we find the lines: "I see it, I see it clearly to the last sharp detail . . . On the bright eminence of time, impervious to rot or destruction, the workshop of human resurrection."

The epilogue to "About That" carries the following heading: "A request addressed to . . . (Please, comrade chemist, fill in the name yourself)." I haven't the slightest doubt that for Majakovskij this was

not just a literary device but a genuine and seriously offered request to some "quiet chemist with a domed forehead" living in the thirtieth century:

> Resurrect me!
> Even if only because I was a poet
> And waited for you.
> And put behind me prosaic nonsense.
> Resurrect me—
> Just for that!
> Do resurrect me—
> I want to live it all out.

The very same "Institute for Human Resurrections" reappears in the play *The Bedbug* but in a comic context. It is the insistent theme of Majakovskij's last writings. Consider the situation in *The Bathhouse:* "A phosphorescent woman out of the future, empowered to select the best people for the future age appears in the time machine: At the first signal we blast off, and smash through old decrepit time . . . Winged time will sweep away and cut loose the ballast, heavy with rubbish and ruined by lack of faith." Once again we see that the pledge of resurrection is faith. Moreover, the people of the future must transform not only their own future, but also the past: "The fence of time/ our feet will trample. . . . As it has been written by us,/ so will the world be/ on Wednesday,/ in the past/ and now/ and tomorrow/ and forever" (from "150,000,000"). The poem written in memory of Lenin offers the same idea, yet in disguised form:

> Death will never dare
> To touch him.
> He stands
> In the total sum of what's to be!
> The young attend
> to these verses on his death
> But their hearts know
> That he's deathless.

In Majakovskij's earliest writings personal immortality is achieved in spite of science. "You students," he says, "all the stuff we know and study is rubbish. Physics, astronomy, and chemistry are all nonsense" (from the poem "Man"). At that time he regarded science as an idle occupation involving only the extraction of square roots or a kind of inhuman collection of fossilized fragments of the summer before last.

His satirical "Hymn to the Scholar" became a genuine and fervent hymn only when he thought he had found the miraculous instrument of human resurrection in Einstein's "futuristic brain" and in the physics and chemistry of the future. "Like logs thrown into a boom we are thown at birth into the Volga of human time; we toss about as we float downstream. But from now on that great river shall be submissive to us. I'll make time stand still, move in another direction and at a new rate of speed. People will be able to get out of the day like passengers getting out of a bus."

Whatever the means of achieving immortality, the vision of it in Majakovskij's verse is unchangeable: there can be no resurrection of the spirit without the body, without the flesh itself. Immortality has nothing to with any other world; it is indissolubly tied to this one. "I'm all for the heart," he wrote in "Man," "but how can bodiless beings have a heart?/ . . . My eyes fixed earthward . . . / This herd of the bodiless,/ how they/ bore me!" "We want to live here on earth—/ no higher and no lower" (*Mystery-Bouffe*). "With the last measure of my heart/ I believe/ in this life,/ in this world,/ in all of it" ("About That"). Majakovskij's dream is of an everlasting earth, and this earth is placed in sharp opposition to all superterrestrial, fleshless abstractions. In his poetry and in Xlebnikov's the theme of earthly life is presented in a coarse, physical incarnation (they even talk about the "flesh" rather than the body). An extreme expression of this is the cult of tender feeling for the beast with his beastly wisdom.

"They will arise from the mounds of graves/ and their buried bones will grow flesh" ("War and the Universe"), wrote Majakovskij. And those lines are not just present simply as a poetic device that motivates the whimsical interweaving of two separate narrative levels. On the contrary—that vision is Majakovskij's most cherished poetic myth.

This constant infatuation with a wonderful future is linked in Majakovskij with a pronounced dislike of children, a fact that would seem at first sight to be hardly consonant with his fanatical belief in tomorrow. But just as we find in Dostoevskij an obtrusive and neurotic "father hatred" linked with great veneration for ancestors and reverence for tradition, so in Majakovskij's spiritual world an abstract faith in the coming transformation of the world is joined quite properly with hatred for the evil continuum of specific tomorrows that only prolong today ("the calendar is nothing but the calendar!") and with undying hostility to that "brood-hen" love that serves only to reproduce the

present way of life. Majakovskij was indeed capable of giving full due to the creative mission of those "kids of the collective" in their unending quarrel with the old world, but at the same time he bristled whenever an actual "kid" ran into the room. Majakovskij never recognized his own myth of the future in any concrete child; these he regarded simply as new offshoots of the hydraheaded enemy. That is why we find in the marvelous movie scenario *How Are You? (Kak poživaete?)* childlike grotesques, which are the legitimate offspring of the Manilov pair Alcides and Themistoclus in Gogol'’s *Dead Souls*. We recall that his youthful poem "A Few Words about Myself" ("Neskol'ko slov obo mne samom") begins with the line "I love to watch children dying." And in the same poem child-murder is elevated to a cosmic theme: "Sun!/ My father!/ At least you have pity and torment me not!/ That's my blood you shed flowing along this low road." And surrounded by that very aura of sunshine, the same "child complex" appears as both an immemorial and personal motif in the poem "War and the Universe":

> Listen—
> The sun just shed his first rays
> not yet knowing
> where he'll go when he's done his day's work;
> and that's me
> Majakovskij.
> Bringing as sacrifice to the idol's pedestal
> a beheaded infant.

There's no doubt that in Majakovskij the theme of child-murder and suicide are closely linked: these are simply two different ways of depriving the present of its immediate succession, of "tearing through decrepit time."

Majakovskij's conception of the poet's role is clearly bound up with his belief in the possibility of conquering time and breaking its steady, slow step. He did not regard poetry as a mechanical superstructure added to the ready-made base of existence (it is no accident that he was so close to the Formalist literary critics). A genuine poet is not one "who feeds in the calm pastures of everyday life; his mug is not pointed at the ground." "The weak ones simply beat time and wait for something to happen that they can echo; but the powerful rush far enough ahead so as to drag time along behind them!" Majakovskij's recurrent image of the poet is one who overtakes time, and we may say that this

is the actual likeness of Majakovskij himself. Xlebnikov and Majakovskij accurately forecast the Revolution (including the date); that is only a detail, but a rather important one. It would seem that never until our day has the writer's fate been laid bare with such pitiless candor in his own words. Impatient to know life, he recognizes it in his own story. The "God-seeker" Blok and the Marxist Majakovskij both understood clearly that verses are dictated to the poet by some primordial, mysterious force. "We know not whence comes the basic beat of rhythm." We don't even know where this rhythm is located: "outside of me or within me? But most likely within me." The poet himself senses the necessity of his own verse, and his contemporaries feel that the poet's destiny is no accident. Is there any one of us who doesn't share the impression that the poet's volumes are a kind of scenario in which he plays out the story of his life? The poet is the principal character, and subordinate parts are also included; but the performers for these later roles are recruited as the action develops and to the extent that the plot requires them. The plot has been laid out ahead of time right down to the details of the dénouement.

The motif of suicide, so alien to the thematics of the Futurist and "Left Front" groups, continually recurs in the work of Majakovskij, from his earliest writings, where madmen hang themselves in an unequal struggle with *byt* (the director, the "man with two kisses" in the *Tragedy*), to the scenario *How Are You?* in which a newspaper article about a girl's suicide induces horror in the poet. And when he tells about a young communist who committed suicide he adds, "How like me that is. Horrors!" He tries on, so to speak, all possible varieties of suicide: "Rejoice now! He'll execute himself . . . The locomotive's wheel will embrace my neck." "I'll run to the canal and there stick my head in the water's grinning mug . . ." "The heart bursts for a bullet, the throat raves for a razor . . . Beckons to the water, leads to the roof's slope . . . Druggist, give me the means to send my soul without any pain into the spacious beyond."

A simple résumé of Majakovskij's poetic autobiography would be the following: the poet nurtured in his heart the unparalleled anguish of the present generation. That is why his verse is charged with hatred for the strongholds of the established order, and in his own work he finds "the alphabet of coming ages." Majakovskij's earliest and most characteristic image is one in which he "goes out through the city leaving his soul on the spears of houses, shred by shred." The hopelessness

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of his lonely struggle with the daily routine became clearer to him at every turn. The brand of martyrdom is burned into him. There's no way to win an early victory. The poet is the doomed "outcast of the present."

> Mama!
> Tell my sisters, Ljuda and Olja,
> That there's no way out.

Gradually the idea that "there's no way out" lost its purely literary character. From the poetic passage it found its way into prose, and "there's no way out" turned up as an author's remark in the margin of the manuscript for "About That." And from that prose context the same idea made its way into the poet's life: in his suicide note he said: "Mama, sisters, comrades, forgive me. This is not a good method (I don't recommend it to others), but for me there's no other way out."

The act was long in preparation. Fifteen years earlier in a prologue to a collection of poems, he wrote:

> Often I think
> Hadn't I better just
> Let a bullet mark the period of my sentence.
> Anyway, today
> I'm giving my farewell concert.

As time went on the theme of suicide became more and more pressing. Majakovskij's most intense poems, "Man" (1916) and "About That" (1923), are dedicated to it. Each of these works is an ominous song of the victory of *byt* over the poet: their leitmotif is "Love's boat has smashed against the daily grind" (a line from his suicide note). The first poem is a detailed depiction of Majakovskij's suicide. In the second there is already a clear sense that the suicide theme transcends literature and is in the realm of "literature of fact." Once again—but even more disturbingly—the images of the first poem file past, the keenly observed stages of existence: the "half-death" in the vortex of the horrifyingly trivial, then the "final death"—"The lead in my heart! Not even a shudder!" This theme of suicide had become so real that it was out of the question to sketch the scene anymore. It had to be exorcised. Propaganda pieces were necessary in order to slow down the inexorable movement of that theme. "About That" already initiates this long cycle of exorcism. "I won't give them the satisfaction of seeing me dead of a bullet." "I want to live on and on, moving through

the years." The lines to Sergej Esenin are the high point of this cycle. According to Majakovskij, the salubrious aim of the lines addressed to Esenin was to neutralize the impact of Esenin's death poem. But when you read them now, they sound even more sepulchral than Esenin's last lines. Esenin's lines equate life and death, but Majakovskij in his poem can only say about life that it's harder than death. This is the same sort of doubtful propaganda for life found in Majakovskij's earlier lines to the effect that only disquiet about the afterlife is a restraint upon the bullet. Such, too, are the farewell words in his suicide letter: "Stay happy here."

In spite of all this the obituary writers vie with one another: "One could expect anything of Majakovskij, but not that he would kill himself." (E. Adamovič). And Lunačarskij: "The idea of suicide is simply incompatible with our image of the poet." And Malkin: "His death cannot be reconciled with his whole life, which was that of a poet completely dedicated to the Revolution." And the newspaper *Pravda:* "His death is just as inconsistent with the life he led, as it is unmotivated by his poetry." And A. Xalatov: "Such a death was hardly proper for the Majakovskij we knew." Or Kol'cov: "It is not right for him. Can it be that none of us knew Majakovskij?" Petr Pil'skij: "He did not, of course, reveal any reason for us to expect such an end." And finally, the poet Demjan Bednyj: "Incredible! What could he have lacked?"

Could these men of letters have forgotten or so misunderstood *All That Majakovskij Composed?* Or was there a general conviction that all of it was only "composed," only invented? Sound literary criticism rejects any direct or immediate conclusions about the biography of a poet when these are based merely on the evidence of his works, but it does not at all follow from this that there is no connection whatsoever between the artist's biography and his art. Such an "antibiographical" position would be the equivalent, in reverse, of the simplistic biographical approach. Have we forgotten Majakovskij's admiration for the "genuine heroism and martyrdom" of Xlebnikov, his teacher? "His life," wrote Majakovskij, "matched his brilliant verbal constructs. That life is an example for poets and a reproach to poetizers." And it was Majakovskij who wrote that even a poet's style of dress, even his intimate conversations with his wife, should be determined by the whole of his poetic production. He understood very well the close connection between poetry and life.

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After Esenin's suicide poem, said Majakovskij, his death became a literary fact. "It was clear at once that those powerful verses, just those verses, would bring to the bullet or the noose many who had been hesitating." And when he approached the writing of his own autobiography, Majakovskij remarked that the facts of a poet's life are interesting "only if they became fixed in the word." Who would dare assert that Majakovskij's suicide was not fixed in the word? "Don't gossip!" Majakovskij adjured us just before his death. Yet those who stubbornly mark out a strict boundary between the "purely personal" fate of the poet and his literary biography create an atmosphere of low-grade, highly personal gossip by means of those significant silences.

It is a historical fact that the people around Majakovskij simply did not believe in his lyrical monologues. "They listened, all smiling, to the eminent clown." They took his various masquerades for the true face of the man: first the pose of the fop ("It's good when the soul is shielded from inspection by a yellow blouse"); then the performance of an overeager journalist and agitator: "It's good when you're in the teeth of the gallows, to cry out: 'Drink Van Houten's cocoa'" ("A Cloud in Trousers"). But then when he carried out that slogan in practice in his advertising jingles ("Use the tea with the gold label!" "If you want good luck and good fortune buy a government lottery ticket!") his audience saw the rhymed advertisement but missed the teeth of the gallows. As it turns out, it was easier to believe in the benefits of a lottery loan or the excellent quality of the pacifiers sold in the state stores than it was to believe that the poet had reached an extreme of despair, that he was in a state of misery and near-death. "About That" is a long and hopeless cry to the ages, but Moscow doesn't believe in tears. They stamped and whistled at this routine Majakovskian artistic stunt, the latest of his "magnificent absurdities," but when the theatrical cranberry juice of the puppet show became real, genuine, thick blood, they were taken aback: Incredible! Inconsistent!

Majakovskij, as an act of self-preservation, often helped to spread illusions about himself. The record of a conversation we had in 1927 demonstrates this. I said, "The total sum of possible experience has been measured out to us. We might have predicted the early decline of our generation. But the symptoms of this are rapidly increasing in number. Take Aseev's line 'What about us, what about us, can it be we've lost our youth?' And consider Šklovskij's memorial service to himself!" Majakovskij answered: "Utter nonsense. Everything is ahead

of me. If I ever thought that the best of me was in the past that would be the end for me." I reminded him of a recent poem of his in which the following lines occurred:

> I was born/ increased in size
> fed from the bottle—
> I lived/ worked/ grew oldish
> And life will pass
> As the Azores Islands
> Once passed into the distance.

"That's nothing," he said, "just a formal ending. An image only. I can make as many of them as you like. My poem 'Homeward' in the first version ended with the lines:

> I want my country to understand me
> But if not—so what:
> I'll just pass my country by
> Like a slanting rain in summer.

But you know, Brik told me to strike those lines out because they didn't go with the tone of the whole poem. So I struck them out."

The simplistic Formalist literary credo professed by the Russian Futurists inevitably propelled their poetry toward the antithesis of Formalism—toward the cultivation of the heart's "raw cry" and uninhibited frankness. Formalist literary theory placed the lyrical monologue in quotes and disguised the "ego" of the lyric poet under a pseudonym. But what unbounded horror results when suddenly you see through the pseudonym, and the phantoms of art invade reality, just as in Majakovskij's scenario *Bound in Film* a girl is kidnapped from a movie set by a mad artist and lands in "real life."

Toward the end of his life, the satire and the laudatory ode had completely overshadowed his elegiac verse, which, by the way, he identified with the lyric in general. In the West the existence of this basic core in Majakovskij's poetry was not even suspected. The West knew only the "drummer of the October Revolution." There are many explanations for this victory of agit-prop. In 1923 Majakovskij had reached the end of the road as far as the elegiac mode was concerned. In an artistic sense "About That" was a "repetition of the past," intensified and raised to perfection. His journalistic verse was a search for something new; it was an experiment in the production of new materials and in untested genres. To my skeptical comments about these poems

Majakovskij replied: "Later on you'll understand them." And when *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse* appeared it became clear that his most recent poems had been a huge laboratory experiment in language and theme, a labor masterfully exploited in his first efforts in the area of prose drama and offering a rich potential for future growth.

Finally, in connection with its social setting, the journalistic verse of Majakovskij represented a shift from an unrestrained frontal attack in the direction of an exhausting trench warfare. *Byt,* with its swarm of heartbreaking trivia, is still with him. And it is no longer "rubbish with its own proper face," but "petty, small, vulgar rubbish." You cannot resist the pressure of such rubbish by grandiloquent pronouncements "in general and in toto," or by theses on communism, or by pure poetic devices. "Now you have to see the enemy and take aim at him." You have to smash the "swarm of trivia" offered by *byt* "in a small way" and not grieve that the battle has been reduced to many minor engagements. The invention of strategies for describing "trifles that may also prove a sure step into the future"—this is how Majakovskij understood the immediate task of the poet.

Just as one must not reduce Majakovskij the propagandist to a single dimension, so, too, one-sided interpretations of the poet's death are shallow and opaque. "The preliminary investigation indicates that his act was prompted by motives of a purely personal character." But the poet had already provided an answer to that in the subtitle of "About That": "From personal motives, but about the general way of life."

Bela Kun preached to the late poet not to "subordinate the great cause to our own petty personal feelings." Majakovskij had entered his objection in good time:

> With this petty/ and personal theme
> That's been sung so many times
> I've trod the poetical treadmill
> And I'm going to tread it again.
> This theme/ right now
> Is a prayer to Buddha
> And sharpens a black man's knife for his master.
> If there's life on Mars/ and on it just one
> Human-hearted creature
> Then he too is writing now
> About that same thing.

The journalist Kol'cov hastened to explain: "Majakovskij himself was wholly absorbed in the business affairs of various literary groups

and in political matters. Someone else fired that shot, some outsider who happened to be in control of a revolutionary poet's mind and will. It was the result of the temporary pressure of circumstances." And once again we recall the rebuke Majakovskij delivered long before the fact:

> Dreams are a harm
> And it's useless to fantasize.
> You've got to bear the burden of service.
> But sometimes—
> Life appears to you in a new light
> And through the mess of trifles
> You catch sight of something great and good.

"We condemn this senseless, unforgivable act. It was a stupid and cowardly death. We cannot but protest most vigorously against his departure from life, against his incongruous end." (Such was the pronouncement of the Moscow Soviet and others.) But Majakovskij had already parodied these very funeral speeches in *The Bedbug:* "Zoja Berëzkin's shot herself—Aha! She'll catch it for that at her party-section meeting." Says a doctor in the future world commune: "What is suicide? . . . You shot at yourself? . . . Was it an accident?" "No, it was from love." "Nonsense . . . Love makes you want to build bridges and have children . . . But you . . . Yes, yes, yes!"

In general life has been imitating Majakovskij's satirical lines with horrifying regularity. Pobedonosikov, the comic figure in *The Bathhouse,* who has many features that remind us of Lunačarskij, brags that "I have no time for boat rides . . . Such petty entertainments are for various secretaries: 'Float on, gondola mine!' I have no gondola but a ship of state." And now Lunačarskij himself faithfully echoes his comic double. At a meeting called in memory of the poet, the minister hastens to explain that the former's farewell lines about a "love-boat smashed on daily grind" have a pathetic sound: "We know very well that it was not on any love-boat that he sailed our stormy seas. He was the captain of a mighty ship of state." These efforts to forget the "purely personal" tragedy of Majakovskij sometimes take the form of conscious parody. A group of writers in a provincial town published a resolution in which they assure Soviet society that they will take very seriously the advice of the late poet not to follow his example.

It is very strange that on this occasion such terms as "accidental," "personal," and so forth are used precisely by those who have always preached a strict social determinism. But how can one speak of a pri-

vate episode when the law of large numbers is at work, in view of the fact that in a few years' time the whole bloom of Russian poetry has been swept away?

In one of Majakovskij's longer poems, each of the world's countries brings its best gift to the man of the future; Russia brings him poetry. "The power of their voices is most resoundingly woven into song." Western Europe is enraptured with Russian art: the medieval icon and the modern film, the classical ballet and the latest theatrical experiment, yesterday's novel and the latest music. And yet that art which is probably Russia's greatest achievement, her poetry, has never really been an export item. It is intimately Russian and closely linked to the Russian language and would probably not survive the misfortunes of translation. Russian poetry has witnessed two periods of high flowering: the beginning of the nineteenth century and the present century. And the earlier period as well as the later had as its epilogue the untimely death of very many great poets. If you can imagine how slight the contributions of Schiller, Hoffmann, Heine, and especially Goethe would have been if they had all disappeared in their thirties, then you will understand the significance of the following Russian statistics: Ryleev was executed when he was thirty-one. Batjuškov went mad when he was thirty. Venevitinov died at the age of twenty-two, Del'vig at thirty-two. Griboedov was killed when he was thirty-four, Puškin when he was thirty-seven, Lermontov when he was twenty-six. Their fate has more than once been characterized as a form of suicide. Majakovskij himself compared his duel with *byt* to the fatal duels of Puškin and Lermontov. There is much in common in the reactions of society in both periods to these untimely losses. Once again, a feeling of sudden and profound emptiness overwhelms one, an oppressive sense of an evil destiny lying heavily on Russian intellectual life. But now as then other notes are louder and more insistent.

The Western mind can hardly comprehend the stupid, unrestrained abuse of the dead poets. A certain Kikin expressed great disappointment that Martynov, the killer of that "cowardly scoundrel Lermontov," had been arrested. And Tsar Nicholas I's final words on the same poet were: "He was a dog and he died a dog's death." And in the same spirit the emigré newspaper *The Rudder (Rul')* carried no obituary on the occasion of Majakovskij's death, but instead a cluster of abusive remarks leading up to the following conclusion: "Majakovskij's whole life gave off a bad smell. Is it possible that his tragic end could set all

that right?" (Ofrosimov). But what of the Kikins and Ofrosimovs? They're but illiterate zeros who will be mentioned in the history of Russian culture, if at all, only for having defecated on the fresh graves of poets. It is incomparably more distressing to see slops of slander and lies poured on the dead poet by Xodasevič, who is privy to poetry. He certainly knows the value of things; he knows he is slanderously smearing one of the greatest Russian poets. When he caustically remarks that only some fifteen active years were allotted to Majakovskij—"the lifetime of a horse"—it is self-abuse, gallows humor, mockery of the tragic balance sheet of his own generation. If Majakovskij's final balance sheet was "life and I are quits," then Xodasevič's shabby little fate is "the most terrible of amortizations, the amortization of heart and soul."

The latter was written about emigré philistines. But the tradition of Puškin's days is repeated by the same philistines of Moscow stock who immediately try at all costs to replace the live image of the poet by a canonic saintlike mask. And even earlier . . . But of what went on earlier, Majakovskij himself related a few days before his death in a talk at a literary gathering: "So many dogs snipe at me and I'm accused of so many sins, both ones I have and ones I am innocent of, that at times it seems to me as if all I want to do is go away somewhere and sit still for a couple of years, if only to avoid listening to barking!" And this harrassment, framing the poet's demise, was precisely described in advance by Majakovskij:

Yellow rag after yellow rag
  of curses be raised!
Gossip for your ears!
  Gossip and bite!
I'm like a cripple in the throes of love.
Leave a tub of slops for your own.
I'm not a hindrance.
  But why all these insults?
I'm only a verse
  I'm only a soul.
While below:
  No!
    You're our century-old foe.
One such turned up—
    A hussar!
Have a sniff of powder,
  a little pistol lead.

Fling open your shirt!
  Don't celebrate the coward!

This is just another example of what they call the "incongruity" between Majakovskij's end and his life of yesterday.

Certain questions are particularly intriguing to journalists. Who was responsible for the war? Who was to blame for the poet's death? Biographers are amateur private detectives, and they will certainly take great pains to establish the immediate reason for the suicide. They will add other names to that variegated assemblage of poet-killers, the "son of a bitch D'Anthès" who killed Puškin, the "dashing Major Martynov" who killed Lermontov, and so forth. People who seek the explanation of various phenomena will, if they bear Russia a grudge, readily demonstrate, citing chapter, verse, and historical precedent, that it is dangerous to practice the trade of poet in Russia. And if their grudge is only against contemporary Russia, it will also be quite easy to defend such a thesis with weighty arguments. But I am of another mind. It seems to me that the one nearest the truth was the young Slovak poet Novomeský who said: "Do you imagine that such things happen only there, in Russia? Why that's what our world is like nowadays." This is in answer to those phrases, which have alas become truisms, concerning the deadly absence of fresh air, certainly a fatal condition for poets. There are some countries where men kiss women's hands, and others where they only say "I kiss your hand." There are countries where Marxist theory is answered by Leninist practice, and where the madness of the brave, the martyr's stake, and the poet's Golgotha are not just figurative expressions.

In the last analysis, what distinguishes Russia is not so much the fact that her great poets have ceased to be, but rather that not long ago she had so many of them. Since the time of the first Symbolists, Western Europe has had no great poetry.

The real question concerns not causes but consequences, however tempting it may be to protect oneself from a painful realization of what's happened by discussing the reasons for it.

It's a small thing to build a locomotive:
Wind up its wheels and off it goes.
But if a song doesn't fill the railway station—
Then why do we have alternating current?

Those lines are from Majakovskij's "Order to the Army of Art" ("Prikaz po armii iskusstv"). We are living in what is called the "reconstruction period," and no doubt we will construct a great many locomotives and scientific hypotheses. But to our generation has been allotted the morose feat of building without song. And even if new songs should ring out, they will belong to another generation and a different curve of time. Yet it is unlikely that there will be new songs. Russian poetry of our century is copying and it would seem outdoing that of the nineteenth century: "the fateful forties are approaching," the years, in other words, of lethargic inertia among poets.

The relationships between the biographies of a generation and the march of history are curious. Each age has its own inventory of requisitions upon private holdings. Suddenly history finds a use for Beethoven's deafness and Cézanne's astigmatism. The age at which a generation's call to service in history's conscription comes, as well as the length of its service, are different for different periods. History mobilizes the youthful ardor of some generations and the tempered maturity or old wisdom of others. When their role is played out yesterday's rulers of men's minds and hearts depart from the proscenium to the backstage of history to live out their years in private, either on the profits from their intellectual investments, or else as paupers. But sometimes it happens otherwise. Our generation emerged at an extraordinarily young age: "We alone," as Majakovskij put it, "are the face of our time. The trumpet of time blows for us." But up to the present moment there are not any replacements, nor even any partial reinforcements. Meanwhile the voice and the emotion of that generation have been cut short, and its allotted quota of feeling—joy and sadness, sarcasm and rapture—have been used up. And yet, the paroxysm of an irreplaceable generation turned out to be no private fate, but in fact the face of our time, the breathlessness of history.

We strained toward the future too impetuously and avidly to leave any past behind us. The connection of one period with another was broken. We lived too much for the future, thought about it, believed in it; the news of the day—sufficient unto itself—no longer existed for us. We lost a sense of the present. We were the witnesses of and participants in great social, scientific, and other cataclysms. *Byt* fell behind us, just as in the young Majakovskij's splendid hyperbole: "One foot has not yet reached the next street." We knew that the plans of our fathers were already out of harmony with the facts of their lives. We read harsh lines alleging that our fathers had taken the old and musty way of life on a temporary lease. But our fathers still had left some remnant of faith in the idea that that way of life was both comfortable

and compulsory for all. Their children had only a single-minded, naked hatred for the ever more threadbare, ever more alien rubbish offered by the established order of things. And now the "efforts to organize a personal life are like attempts to heat up ice cream."

As for the future, it doesn't belong to us either. In a few decades we shall be cruelly labeled as products of the past millennium. All we had were compelling songs of the future; and suddenly these songs are no longer part of the dynamic of history, but have been transformed into historico-literary facts. When singers have been killed and their song has been dragged into a museum and pinned to the wall of the past, the generation they represent is even more desolate, orphaned, and lost—impoverished in the most real sense of the word.

CHAPTER 17

Marginal Notes on the Prose of the Poet Pasternak

Textbook categories are comfortingly simple: prose is one thing, poetry another. Nevertheless, the difference between a poet's prose and that of a prose writer, or between the poems of a prose writer and those of a poet, is very striking. A mountaineer walking in the plains can find no foothold and stumbles over the level ground. He moves either with touching awkwardness or with overemphatic artistry; in either case it is not his natural gait, but involves obvious effort and looks too much like the steps of a dancer. It is easy to distinguish a language that has been learnt, however perfect its command, from one that has been naturally acquired. Cases of complete bilingualism are, of course, undeniable, and when we read the prose of Puškin or Mácha, of Lermontov or Heine, of Pasternak or Mallarmé, we cannot help being amazed at the command these writers have of the other language; but at the same time we are bound to pick out a foreign note, as it were, in the accent and inner form of their speech. Their achievements in this second language are brilliant sallies from the mountains of poetry into the plains of prose.

It is not only a poet's prose that has a particular stamp; there is also

"Roman Jakobson has given us a marvelous gift: he has given linguistics to artists. It is he who has opened up the live and sensitive juncture between one of the most exact of the sciences of man and the creative world. He represents, both for his theoretical thought and for his actual accomplishments, the meeting of scientific thought and the creative spirit."

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